

A History of Tennessee Agriculture

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Agriculture is Important to Tennessee

Tennessee is more than 200 years old. A lot of things have changed since Tennessee became a state in 1796. But, from the start, Tennessee has been a state with agriculture.



Agriculture is when we grow plants and animals to feed us and make clothes for us. The bacon, eggs and milk you have for breakfast come from farm animals. The corn and beans you eat for supper come from farm plants. Your shirt or blouse may be made from cotton, which is a farm plant. Agriculture is also about growing trees to build houses and other useful things. Even if you live in a brick house, it also has wood in it.

The Early Days



The first agriculture in Tennessee was in towns of American Indians, also called Native Americans. They used trees to make things and grew corn, pumpkins, and tobacco.

Later, as white settlers moved into Tennessee, they built log cabins and farmed. This cabin shows what many of the first farm houses in Tennessee looked like.

At first Tennessee had mostly small farms. But in the early 1800's a new kind of agriculture came to Tennessee. It was known as plantation agriculture. Plantations had lots of land to grow more than you could on a small farm. Most plantations were in West and Middle Tennessee where there aren't as many mountains. Many plantations grew cotton. Some owners of plantations became rich and built big houses. This is the house built by Andrew Jackson. He was a war hero and later President of the United States.



How The Government Helped Farmers



States began trying to help their farmers. Here in Tennessee we formed the Bureau of Agriculture in 1854. This was eight years before the United States created the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Bureau of Agriculture has changed its name. Today we call it the Tennessee Department of Agriculture.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Tennessee was one of the southern states that began a new way to help farmers and their families learn about agriculture. In 1887, the U.S. Congress helped states begin experiments at colleges. They studied what kinds of crops to grow, when to plant and how much fertilizer to use.

But, what if you weren't in college? How did you find out what the scientists had learned?

In Tennessee, 12 county school systems began boys' corn clubs in 1910. In the corn clubs, boys learned how to grow corn. Later that year, Tennessee picked its first county agricultural agent to work with farmers. About the same time, they chose another agent to teach canning to women and girls. Canning is a way to save fresh food to eat at a later time, usually by heating it to kill harmful bacteria that would cause it to spoil and sealing it in a clean, air-tight glass jar. In 1914, success in the South led the U.S. Congress to pass an act to help farmers and their families in all states.



Getting the Work Done

Animals have done their part for Tennessee Agriculture. They helped farmers by pulling heavy plows or moving other heavy things. One of these animals was the mule. The city of Columbia honors mules each year for the help they gave Tennessee.

But, things were changing. Inventors were making machines to help farmers. In the late 1800s many new machines began changing agriculture. Little by little, machines replaced the mules. These tractors used in the early days were quite different than the ones we use today.



Taking Care of the Land



As we cut trees and plowed fields, soil started washing away. This is called "erosion." Water cut gullies in farmers' fields. Soil washed into streams and lakes. But, scientists taught farmers how to plow their fields to reduce erosion. Today, many Tennessee farmers plant their crops using the no-till method. This means they don't plow the soil. They put their seeds in unplowed soil. This kind of farming helps prevent water pollution.

Farming Now and in the Future

Technology is the latest thing changing Tennessee agriculture. Farmers use computers to prepare feed for their animals, keep track of their money, and other things too. Some farmers are even starting to use information beamed off satellites.



Agriculture has always been important in Tennessee, even before we became a state. When we formed Tennessee, the founders thought agriculture was so important that they put the word "agriculture" on the state seal. And agriculture will continue to be important in the 21st century.

Tennessee's Forest Heritage



Some people might not think of forests as being part of agriculture. But when we grow trees for our use, they are a part of agriculture. In a way, Tennessee's forests were the beginning of agriculture in the state. Forests supplied many of the needs of Native American and the white settlers who came later. Trees provided logs for buildings, furniture and fences. Wood was also used for fuel.

To those carving farms from the wilderness, forests got in the way. So the trees were cut and burned to make way for pastures and crops. No one tried to stop forest fires. There was so much forest that no one believed we would ever use it up. But, by the early 1900s, we had cut all of the old forests. New trees tried to grow but forest fires destroyed many of them. People warned that Tennessee could soon lose all its forests.

Protecting Our Forests



Tennessee passed a General Forestry Law in 1907, but it was not till 1914 that a state forester was hired. Fire control efforts began in 1922. A state nursery began growing tree seedlings to plant on Tennessee's eroding soil.

Today the Division of Forestry controls forest fires and grows seedlings, and it helps people grow trees. Now half the state is covered in forests just as it was in 1874.

Nearly all of the trees are hardwoods like oak, yellow poplar, dogwood and hickory. The rest are softwoods like pine, red cedar, bald cypress and hemlock.

Tennessee's forests are healthy, too. Forest fires burn very little of our forests. And we grow more timber than we cut. Hardwood lumber is made into furniture and flooring. Hardwoods and pines are used in making paper and fiberboard.



Our forests do more than grow wood. They give us a place to hike, camp, and just enjoy the beauty. And, forests aren't just for people. They're home for wildlife. And they protect rare plants and animals too.

Here's a riddle. How are you like Native Americans and early settlers? You both have Tennessee's forests to use and enjoy.